

Presenter: Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Navy Adm. Mike Mullen

November 15, 2007

DoD News Briefing with Secretary of Defense Gates and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. Mullen from the Pentagon Briefing Room, Arlington, Va.

SEC. GATES: Good afternoon. I have a statement, and copies of it will be available after the -- after the press briefing.

Yesterday Secretary Rice and I, General Cartwright and Deputy Treasury Secretary Kimmitt met with members of Congress to discuss ongoing operations in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere. We reviewed the real security gains being made in Iraq as well as the political and economic situation.

I also strongly urged the Congress to pass a global war on terror funding bill that the president would sign. With the passage of the Defense Appropriations Act, there is a misperception that this department can continue funding our troops in the field for an indefinite period of time through accounting maneuvers, that we can shuffle money around the department. This is a serious misconception.

The fact is, the department has significantly less funding flexibility than it had last spring. In the fall of 2006, Congress provided us with a bridge fund of \$70 billion until passage of the full war supplemental. The full supplemental did not pass Congress until late May.

This fall, the department has been operating under a continuing resolution. Now that the regular appropriations bill has been enacted, we are left with no bridge fund and only our base budget to support normal war operations. Further, Congress has provided very limited flexibility to deal with this funding shortage. We can only move a total of \$3.7 billion under general transfer authority, which only amounts to a little over one week's worth of war expenses.

All this leaves the department only with undesirable options to continue operations in the absence of a bridge fund. The path we believe is least undesirable fiscally and militarily would involve the following. The military would cease operations at all Army bases by mid-February next year. This would result in the furloughing of about 100,000 government employees and a like number of contractor employees at Army bases.

These layoffs would have a cascading effect on depots and procurements. Similar actions would follow for the Marine Corps about a month later. By law, we're required to notify certain union employees 60 days in advance, so appropriate notices would have to go out starting in mid-December.

If the Congress does not provide bridge funding this week on a bill that the president will sign, and given the uncertainty of future action in December, by the end of this week, as a prudent manager, I will be obliged to take a series of anticipatory steps. First, submit an urgent reprogramming request to the Congress. And second, direct the Army and Marine Corps to develop a plan to furlough employees, terminate contracts and prepare bases for reduced operations.

These plans would begin to be implemented in mid-December. It is a fact of life that even if we received a \$50 billion bridge now, and the president signs it, it will fund war operations only through about the end of February. And so we would be back in this situation immediately after the Congress reconvenes in late January.

A final point, I make these comments solely as the person charged by the president and the Congress with administering the Department of Defense. The high degree of uncertainty on funding for the war is immensely complicating this task and will have many real consequences for this department and for our men and women in uniform.

Admiral?

ADM. MULLEN: Good afternoon. I just returned from Brussels, which was a -- I attended my first NATO military committee meeting in this job. We discussed a significant amount of -- spent a significant amount of time on Afghanistan and the mission there, which support for it remains very strong, and we also discussed the challenges in that mission and didn't come away with all the answers to manning, resourcing and caveats, but we had some very frank discussions, which I consider to be positive.

It's also important to note the other vital missions that the NATO alliance performs both in and outside the long war. Very active in a mission called Active Endeavor and have been for several years, which has become more and more effective; the training mission in Iraq and also operations in the Balkans. We also elected the next chairman of the military committee, Admiral Di Paola of Italy, and I'd like to just extend my congratulations to him. He's a superb leader, and I've known him for several years. And I'd like to extend my thanks and appreciation to General Ray Henault from Canada for his service and leadership as current chairman.

I'd like to switch and just spend a minute on Pakistan. I know there's been lots of discussion about the security of the nuclear weapons. I'd like to be very clear. I don't see any indication right now that security of those weapons is in jeopardy, but clearly we are very watchful as we should be.

As far as operations are concerned, our military-to-military contacts and dialogue between leaders continue, and I see no disruption of that as a result of the emergency measures in place. I've also not seen and do not anticipate any interruption of the logistics

through Pakistan at this point, and certainly, we are spending time watching each one of these areas, but I just wanted to bring you up to speed.

So no major changes to our military relationship with Pakistan, watching it very carefully. We'd certainly like to see the emergency measures end as soon as possible, but I believe militarily the situation is stable.

And then, lastly, I'd just like to follow up on what the secretary said in terms of executing the budget inside the current constraints.

As a former service chief and in a position to have to deal with these uncertainties and -- the secretary pointed out -- anticipatory things that leaders and managers have to do, without the kind of bridge support that's being requested, services start reacting very, very quickly inside the services, anticipating even the anticipatory measures that the secretary spoke of. And it just -- from a management standpoint and actually from an expense standpoint, you do start to draw in very quickly. And your ability to execute a budget is much less effective and much less efficient. Thank you.

Q Mr. Secretary, following on Admiral Mullen's comments about Pakistan's nuclear weapons, are there gaps in the U.S. government's knowledge about the safeguard system in Pakistan, such that you are -- either have received or are seeking assurances from the Pakistanis about the condition of those safeguards?

SEC. GATES: I'm not aware that we have either asked or received from the Pakistanis any reassurances. I have the sense people are comfortable.

Q Are there gaps in the U.S. government's knowledge about the way that system works?

SEC. GATES: I don't know the answer to that.

Q Secretary Gates, did you see this coming yesterday when you were on the Hill, that the leadership in Congress was not going to give you more, was not going to -- I mean, you must have issued this same warning. They say -- the Democratic Party leaders say they want the war to end. That's not what your timetable is suggesting.

SEC. GATES: Well, you know, my view, and I actually said this at least in front of one of the houses and maybe both. You know, initially the president was asked to announce that drawdowns would begin in our troops. Then he was asked to set a date for when the drawdowns would begin. Then he was asked to give a timetable for the drawdowns, and then he was asked to change the mission of the troops.

The president has moved in all four of these areas.

He's announced there will be drawdowns. The drawdowns have already started. The timetable is as laid out by General Petraeus for at least the first five combat --

brigade combat teams, and that we will begin the transition of mission in December, when the first brigade combat team comes out.

So the issue now really is about pacing, how fast do you change the mission, how fast do you draw down the troops. And what I told members of Congress yesterday is, for those who allege that the views of the generals were not sufficiently taken into account at the front end of the war, now you have a recommendation from the commander in the field, from the commander of CENTCOM and from the Joint Chiefs of Staff, unanimous, on what makes sense in terms of pacing, so that we don't put at risk the gains we've already made, the Iraqis know that they will be taking increasing responsibility, and we move toward the drawdowns that we've described here before. And the drawdowns, as I say, have already begun.

It seems to me that there ought to be some deference to those who are running the war, the generals, in terms of the -- whether it -- at the pace at which this drawdown should take place, and based on the conditions on the ground.

However one feels about how we got to this point, the reality is, we have had some significant success due to the efforts of our men and women in uniform, in particular, and their sacrifices. We don't want to sacrifice that success, and so how do we get the next phase of this conflict right, because the consequences of getting it wrong are potentially very high.

So it seems to me that's -- I think that the debate has really moved on. It's really not about principles, it seems to me, anymore. It's about pacing. And that's where I think deference should be paid to the views of those conducting the operations.

Yeah?

Q Mr. Secretary, the general who leads Turkey's land forces has just announced that the implementation of a cross-border operation into northern Iraq has begun. Do you know anything about this operation? And is this the result of any actionable intelligence the United States was able to provide Turkey?

SEC. GATES: This was the first I've heard about it.

ADM. MULLEN: Yeah. Me as well.

Q Mr. Secretary, General Odierno is quoted as saying that if there hasn't been significant progress by the Iraqi government by this summer, that the U.S. ought to reassess its strategy.

Others in Congress, including Senators Levin and Warner, said that they think now is the time to reassess the strategy, based on the failures of the Iraqi government.

What's your view? Has the Iraqi government squandered the opportunity that the surge has provided?

SEC. GATES: Well, I haven't read General Odierno's comments, so I'm not going to comment on what he said.

I will say that the area that we have focused on in terms of the benchmark legislation clearly is one where the Iraqi government has not moved as quickly as we would wish, and we continue to make that point to them at every level of government. By the same token, as we've discussed in here before, there have been developments, positive developments politically and economically, that we did not anticipate. We've talked before about the Anbar awakening and what has happened in Al Anbar.

There are other things happening. Some of the Sunni sheikhs are now talking to Shi'a sheikhs. And so you're getting some cross- sectoral, sectarian contact and dialogue.

You're beginning to get pressure from the provinces on the government to deliver faster in terms of resources and so on. And you already know about the fact that revenues are being shared pretty much along the lines of the percentages in the hydrocarbon law. De- Ba'athification is taking place as thousands of Sunnis are rejoining or joining the police and the army.

So I think that there have been some positive developments on the -- in the political arena. They have not been on the benchmark legislation. They have passed a slew of other legislation. Secretary Kimmitt talked about a lot of that in the briefings yesterday before the Congress, in terms of investment, a whole range of issues. We continue to put pressure on the Iraqis to get moving on this other legislation. We would like to see more progress. But there have been positive developments in other ways. So I don't think that the efforts of our troops have been squandered in Iraq. They have been taken advantage of in ways that we didn't anticipate originally.

Q Mr. Secretary, are you concerned that a lack of political progress at the national level could jeopardize whatever successes have already been achieved through the surge?

SEC. GATES: Well, I think we're seeing politics unfold in Iraq, as I say, in some ways that we didn't anticipate, and we are beginning to see -- as I just indicated, we are beginning to see some very tentative indications that there is increasing pressure from some of the provinces on the ministries and on the central government to get on with sorting out some of these other problems and to become more effective.

So I think, you know, we're -- we need to keep the pressure on and I think we will.

Q You sound more optimistic than the generals on the ground that this is actually going to happen.

SEC. GATES: Well, I think that the generals on the ground would be the first to talk about the local and provincial developments that I described, because in many ways they have been the facilitators of it.

(To Admiral Mullen) I don't know if you want to add anything?

ADM. MULLEN: I think that's true. I would only echo what the secretary said. Clearly, there has been progress in the provinces, and that those who lead people on the ground have facilitated that in many, many ways. And there have been things -- another aspect of this -- that have contributed significantly has been the concerned local citizens -- there are some 60(,000) to 70,000 that are out there now -- helping with security and take back their villages and towns.

This continues to be an extraordinary, complex challenge, and reconciliation at the national level is something that we know needs to happen; and like the secretary said, that pressure needs to stay there.

SEC. GATES: I would just add one more sentence. I think that, like I say, I think the generals on the ground would be the first to respond positively in terms of what's happening in the provinces and the local area. Frankly, again, having not seen what General Odierno or any of the other military officers out there have said directly, I have no doubt that they're probably feeling a little frustrated that some of this other legislation hasn't been passed.

Q Well, what are they telling you?

SEC. GATES: Pretty much what I just said.

Q I mean, no, are they telling you precisely that they are worried that this window provided by improved security is going to close without enough political progress to make it all worthwhile?

SEC. GATES: I have not yet heard that.

Q Mr. Secretary, I've been having a little trouble telling whether your frustration with politics is directed at Baghdad or Capitol Hill, but let me just direct it at Capitol Hill for a second. Why do you think your case has been so unpersuasive?

SEC. GATES: Well, I think that there is -- for two reasons, just speaking quite frankly. I think first, I think there is this misperception that now that we have a 2008 appropriations bill, that somehow we can shuffle the money around and find a way to get ourselves to April or May or some period of time. And what I'm just trying to say is I believe the appropriators understand that is not the case.

Those who are not involved in the appropriations process for Defense may not understand just how limited our ability to transfer funds around the department is -- the \$3.7 billion that I talked about. And so they may not understand just how complicated and how -- the situation is, and also how restrictive.

To be honest, I think that there's probably also a sense that things like I talked about today is the Department of Defense crying wolf, that somehow we always figure out a way to make it work. Well, the way we always figure out a way to make it work is because the chiefs and the service secretaries have to jump through hoops to figure out ways to try and be prepared for a cutoff of funds. We come right up to the edge of the precipice. And then just like at the end of last May, we got the supplemental.

So we didn't have to do a lot of the dramatic things that we -- we did a lot of things and scared a lot of people who thought they were going to be furloughed and so on. I mean, we send a lot of signals to people as we try to get ready for these things. But you know, it's a little bit "The Perils of Pauline." And so far, at least in the last -- in my time here, we have gotten the relief from the Congress at the last minute, but it was at the last minute. And as I said before, we were working off of a \$70 billion bridge fund last spring as well.

Q Mr. Secretary, earlier today in his testimony in front of the Senate Armed Services Committee, General Casey mentioned that he'd like to see the Army grow beyond its current goal of 547,000 active duty troops. Given his previous warning that in the event of another global crisis, the Army might not be able to provide those ground troops, do you think the current goal is sufficient? And how large do you think the active duty Army ought to be ultimately?

SEC. GATES: Well, I think that in many respects that depends on the magnitude of the commitments that the Army has. And so if we have the kind of drawdowns that we are anticipating, that obviously is going to relieve some of the pressure on the Army. My view would be, let's get to the 547,000, and then we can talk about what the numbers ought to be after that.

I don't know if you want to --

ADM. MULLEN: In fact, in my discussions with General Casey, we have had exactly that discussion: the need to get the 547, certainly continuously evaluate not just where we are but where we need to go in the future, and whether that should call for a larger force.

Q I'd like to go back to Pakistan for a moment.

You have said more than once that it is crucial that the political unrest there not interfere with the fight against terrorism that's going on, that's being waged by the military. Do you think that General Musharraf can still be an effective leader in that

fight? Or is he now so weakened that he can't perform that role? And would Benazir Bhutto be a more effective leader in organizing and leading that fight?

SEC. GATES: Well, I'm not going to make a call like that. I would say, though, that his ability to lead -- to continue to be a partner in the war on terror very much depends on how developments unfold over the next few weeks in Pakistan, and clearly, as the admiral indicated, we need to -- he needs to move beyond the emergency measures as quickly as possible. I think our view is he needs to step out of his army chief of staff role and become a civilian. But I think it will really depend on how developments unfold.

Q What is the trend that you've see? Do you see things moving in a good trend or --

SEC. GATES: Well, he's announced elections. I think we'll just have to see.

Q But for the first time, Mr. Secretary, you seem to be indicating, as you've said, it depends on what you see over the next several weeks, that the support by the United States and by the U.S. military is not a guaranteed forever. So what is -- if I could ask both of you on Pakistan -- what's the crossover point? At what point in this next several week period that you've just laid out do you know -- does it come to he cannot continue to be your partner in the war on terror? Also, neither of you have spoken yet today about the review of military aid. Does that simply continue unabated?

And Mr. Chairman, you say that Pakistan's nuclear weapons are safe, but can you give the American people any indication of how you've come to that conclusion? What information does the U.S. military have now that leads them to that conclusion?

SEC. GATES: Go ahead.

ADM. MULLEN: We've been obviously conscious of what the Pakistanis have done in the nuclear weapons environment for many years, and currently -- in the current crisis, we've paid an awful lot of attention as we -- actually, as we have in the past. And so I'm confident that at this point that they're secure, and I've seen absolutely no indication to the contrary and would only re-affirm what I said before -- very watchful, mindful certainly of, you know, the general concerns or what the potential could be, but don't see any of that potential being fulfilled at this particular point in time.

Q Have they taken extra measures of protection?

ADM. MULLEN: I'm not going to talk about the kinds of actions that have been taken with respect to those weapons either by us or by them, except to say that, again, we're watchful, and I'm comfortable that the weapons are secure.

Q Mr. Secretary --

SEC. GATES: I would just say General Musharraf, President Musharraf has been a strong ally to this country in the war on terror since 9/11.

I'm not going to start to speculate on future developments.

Q Mr. Secretary?

SEC. GATES: Yeah?

Q Mr. Secretary, so far, 750 MRAPs have been delivered to Iraq. While that's a significant accomplishment, that leaves 740 that would need to be delivered by the end of the year in order to meet the Defense Department's goal. Is that possible?

SEC. GATES: Well, we have begun shipping both by sea now or soon will be, and as well as by air. So certainly my hope is that we'll meet our goal.

Q Wait a minute. You just said "my hope." That sounds a little less confident than I've heard in the past. (Laughter.) Are you saying --

SEC. GATES: (Chuckles.) Because I -- that's because I stopped predicting the future when I left CIA. (Laughter.)

Jonathan?

Q Yeah, coming back to Pakistan, the problem is that the only way to really pressure Musharraf is to seriously threaten to cut off aid or in fact cut off aid. What would the risks be to cutting off our military aid to Pakistan at this point?

SEC. GATES: Well, the review of assistance was undertaken principally after he declared the state of emergency, to find out if there were statutory requirements for us to make any changes. As I understand it, the conclusion of that was not at this time. And so there's been no change, as far as I know.

So what was your question?

Q Well, my question is, what -- to those who say that this is the only way truly to pressure him to step down as military chief of staff, to end the state of emergency -- (inaudible) -- what would risk be? Why would that --

SEC. GATES: I think sometimes we overestimate our influence and our capacity to cause people to do things. I think the principal pressures on President Musharraf are from within Pakistan, not from the United States.

Q Admiral Mullen, I was wondering if you could talk little bit more about the mil-to-mil contacts between the United States and Pakistan. What's the message that they

are sending to the military? Are these mid-level contacts or high-level? And have you talked to General Kiyani about the situation there?

ADM. MULLEN: I haven't. I haven't.

Q Not you particularly but the military in general.

ADM. MULLEN: I haven't spoken with General Kiyani. And the contacts that we've had over the years are being maintained. And I'm again very comfortable that from a military standpoint, that there -- that everything in Pakistan is reasonably normal and that those contacts will continue. And from those contacts there's no indication the situation is anything other than has been described.

Q Mr. Secretary, I'd like to ask you about Darfur. The effort of U.N. peacekeeping, they're trying to get something like 24 helicopters for the peacekeeping force, warning that without those helicopters, that the mission is likely to be at risk. Is that a mission for something that the new Africa Command could undertake? Could the U.S. provide helicopters so that Darfur --

SEC. GATES: Well, let me give you a quick answer and then ask the chairman to chime in.

First of all, I haven't seen such a -- no such request has come to us. I'm not even such a request has come to the United States government at this point. It may have been a broadly expressed need by this fellow.

AFRICOM has not been stood up yet, so it would not have a role.

And I would say just as a matter of general principle, our helicopter resources are pretty -- are pretty pushed between Iraq and Afghanistan. And in fact, a good part of the time that I spent at the NATO defense ministerial was trying to get more allied helicopters into Afghanistan to relieve the stress on ours.

ADM. MULLEN: I'd only say that our assets are really pushed in -- actually, in the last several years, both in operations I was involved with in Europe, in the Balkans, as well as my travels throughout the world, if there's one resource that we're seemingly pretty short of, it's almost universally helicopters. And so there's a great need for them, clearly.

I, like the secretary, haven't -- I'm not aware of any specific request with respect to that. I do know -- back to my time this week in Brussels -- that we were specifically talking about helicopters, as the secretary indicated, to support the mission in Afghanistan. There seems to be enormous pressure on them.

So, one, there always seems to be a need. That would -- that there would be a need makes sense, but where they'd come from would be pretty difficult for us right now.

STAFF: We have time for maybe one more.

Q Mr. Secretary, can I get both of your assessments as to whether this country needs a new GI Bill, and why?

SEC. GATES: This is something that really hasn't come before me in terms of specifics or -- so what I -- what I think I know comes from mainly what I read in the press.

And I will say this. Having served in the military in the mid-'60s, I did a good bit of my Ph.D. work using GI Bill benefits. And clearly the GI Bill educational benefits revolutionized this country after World War II.

So I don't know the particulars about whether -- whether the benefits for education now haven't kept pace with the price of education or whether other benefits have fallen short, but you know, this falls into the category that I think we've all been focused on, and that is how do we treat those who have served properly. And so I think it's certainly something worth looking at.

Thank you all very much.

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